

Fighting COVID-19 in Côte d'Ivoire : Women in the Media Face the Challenges of the Field

Abstract

On March 11, 2020, Côte d'Ivoire recorded its first case of COVID-19. The uproar followed. People rushed to social media, the only public spaces accessible to everyone without fear of being close to others and thus without fear of contracting the virus. Immediately, almost all internet users became broadcasters of information about the new Coronavirus. Press releases, testimonies from relatives of patients, and others circulated across the web. It must be noted that in this clamor, the messages shared were not specific to any gender or profession. Women, men, children, the elderly, workers, the unemployed, urban and rural populations received the same messages. In Côte d'Ivoire, women in the media, mainly female journalists and photographers, wanted to contribute to this widespread awareness. They wanted to specify their messages by targeting women, who, according to them, are at the heart of the social structure in Africa. How did they go about it? Through documentary research and semi-structured individual interviews, the aim will be to highlight the strategies and actions used by them in pursuing their objectives. Roman Jakobson's communication model and agenda-setting theory will help to show how women in the media move from being message receivers to message senders.

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Key words:-

Covid-19, woman, media, health crisis, development

Introduction

On March 11, 2020, Côte d'Ivoire reported its first case of COVID-19. Panic and fear swept through the entire population. The government urgently established a National Security Council tasked with managing the health crisis. As it announced the suspension of classes in public and private schools, the closure of borders, and the implementation of containment measures, everyone threw themselves into the vast field of communication.

The internet is abuzz, as are traditional media outlets. Media professionals and amateurs, bloggers, government officials, civil society... the entire population throws itself wholeheartedly into raising awareness to combat the new virus. Press releases, media statements, radio and television broadcasts, and messages shared online many channels are used to raise awareness. However, it should be noted that women "the true backbone of our society, the pillar of the family, and therefore the primary potential vector for the transmission of COVID-19" have been slow to be identified as a specific target in African national strategies (Diakahby, 2020).

Women in the media have tried to address this gap at their own level. How did they achieve their goal? Based on a literature review and semi-structured individual interviews, this study will shed light on the strategy adopted by women in the media—primarily female journalists and photographers. R. Jacobson's linear model and agenda-setting theory will guide the research approach. Thus, after justifying the chosen theoretical and methodological approaches, the results of the data collection will be presented, analyzed, and then discussed.

It is essential to entrust the fight against the pandemic to African women in general and, more specifically, to Ivorian women in the media, as they ensure higher-quality, inclusive communication (Blanc, Yanick, et al., 2024). This also offers the opportunity to precisely target households and combat misinformation. As community leaders and on-the-ground actors, their commitment brings considerable benefits. They play a vital role as trusted messengers in disseminating prevention messages within households and local communities. Journalists and communicators take into account the gendered impact of the crisis (such as the increase in unpaid care work and violence) in their media coverage (Damian-Gaillard, Frisque, Saitta, 2009, 187). Their ability to simplify scientific information helps effectively help combat misinformation and reassure the public.

“Women account for 70 percent of the global social and health care workforce, and special attention should be paid to how their work environment may expose them to discrimination, as well as to considerations regarding their sexual and reproductive health and their psychosocial needs as frontline health care workers.” (UNFPA, 2020, p. 2)

Awareness campaigns must be carried out among African women, who are the true backbone of our society and potential vectors for the transmission of COVID-19. (La Tribune, 2020). Because they make up the majority of the workforce in all healthcare sectors, women are better equipped to combat COVID-19, as they have firsthand expertise regarding patients’ needs and gaps in the system. They provide virtually all daily patient care. Furthermore, they promptly identify gaps in equipment and protocols.

They frequently manage health and hygiene within the household. In terms of community trust, they enjoy the confidence of local communities to convey prevention messages. Their traditional role includes a significant component of emotional support, which is essential during times of crisis. And they effectively track chains of transmission, thanks to their deep roots in the community. By including them in crisis committees, we can avoid the adoption of policies that are out of touch with reality, while ensuring the continuation of essential services such as maternal health and routine vaccination.

It is therefore disheartening that no specific awareness-raising efforts are being made among women the true backbone of our society and, now, the primary potential vectors for the transmission of COVID-19 (Potemski, 2022). Communication about this scourge must absolutely improve, particularly among women, because, when properly informed, they have the power to contain the spread of the virus.

In Africa, the functioning of health care systems relies heavily on the unpaid and invisible labor performed by women. They are the ones who care for our sick, our elders, and our children suffering from various illnesses. Without their invaluable contributions, our health care systems would be unsustainable. Their invaluable contributions and the risks they face have been widely highlighted in nations affected by the devastating Ebola outbreak (including Guinea, from December 2013 to December 2015). (Generation Equality Forum, 2021). Just as healthcare workers are potentially exposed to a high risk of infection, women due to their crucial role in our societies are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.

In Africa, health care systems rely largely on the unpaid and invisible labor of women. This is what Guinean feminist Maïmouna Diakahby argues, putting it this way: In Nairobi, women are lining up for a food distribution for those suffering from the coronavirus-related restrictions in Kenya (Diakahby, 2020). They are the ones who care for our sick, our elderly, and our children suffering from various ailments. Without their invaluable work, our healthcare systems would not function. Their inestimable contribution, as well as the dangers to which they are exposed, were brought sharply into focus in countries affected by the devastating Ebola epidemic (including Guinea, from December 2013 to December 2015). For just as healthcare workers face a high risk of infection, women due to their central role in our societies are the most vulnerable to COVID-19.

1- Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

1.1. Theoretical Approach

1.1.1. Roman Jakobson's Linear Model

One of the most widely used basic linear models in communication is that of the American linguist Roman Jakobson (1963). This positivist model posits that every message transmitted originates from a sender (sender) to a receiver (recipient) via a channel, using a code; all within a specific context. Thus, the interactions among these six (6) elements constitute the communication process.

In this specific case, this process takes place with the aim of bringing about cognitive and attitudinal change in the field of health. Thus, the sender transmits messages to the target with the goal of encouraging them to adopt habits and behaviors that help prevent infection with and the spread of the coronavirus. The sender therefore seeks to convince or dissuade the recipient through their discourse. In other words, the sender is determined to convince the recipient through their message. In this study, the senders are female reporters namely, journalists, photographers, and camerawomen. The recipients are their target audiences : readers for print media, listeners for radio, viewers for television, and Internet users for online media. The channels are the various media platforms : print, television, radio, and the Internet. The code is the French language or any other national or foreign language used to convey the message. This communication process takes place within the context of raising awareness for the fight against COVID-19.

1.1.2. Agenda-Setting/Agenda-Building and Gatekeeping: The Power of Female Reporters to Prioritize News Stories in Their Assignments

Agenda-setting (1972), as developed by McCombs and Shaw, posits that the media impose their agenda on the general public. Thus, agenda setting clearly reflects the power of media presenters to prioritize the news stories they broadcast. This power is evident in the "gatekeeper" role played by journalists. These theories remain relevant today and help explain the influence of journalists during a health crisis. Naturally, the news story imposes itself on the journalist, given the nature of the crisis. However, how these facts are highlighted is determined by the primary news source within the media. Given that the hypothesis of a media-imposed agenda on the public is already accepted, it is clear that this correlation varies in strength depending on the topics covered, the nature of the facts

(whether shocking, incisive, or not), the nature of the information sources, and so on. Thus, the angle from which the crisis is covered will depend on the journalist, their editorial stance, and their level of knowledge on the issue. It is the journalist who influences public opinion and perception of the phenomenon. “The media influence the public agenda to the extent that the public adjusts its perception of the relative importance of issues to the importance the media assign to them.” (Charron, 1995, 89). Thus, the media’s power over cognitive and emotional processes is palpable.

In such cases, therefore, female journalists and reporters decide when prioritizing the facts and elements to highlight in their various media outlets to give priority to COVID-19 coverage. That said, in this exercise of “gatekeeping” and prioritization of facts, COVID-19 imposes itself on all media actors, as the disease remains a mystery a devastating new threat on the global stage. Here, the term “agenda-building” (Charron, 1995) would be most appropriate. This is due to the undeniable influence of the “new” disease on news coverage. From the Americas to Africa, and across Europe, Asia, and Oceania, the coronavirus dominates the headlines; as a result, no media professional can afford not to feature it prominently in their coverage.

Furthermore, the role of “gatekeeper” (Allen and Hawkins, 1999; Lewin, 1947) empowers reporters to make choices and, above all, to determine the angle from which events are covered. The media thus dictate the nature and type of information they want their audiences to receive.

1.2. Methodological Approach

An in-depth review was conducted of numerous documents related to the activities of women in the media in Côte d’Ivoire and around the world, on the one hand, and of the theories mentioned above, on the other. The empirical sources include, among others, two 2020 UNFPA reports; the 2020 report by equipop.org, which brings together several NGOs worldwide working in the field of women’s rights and health: “Women’s Rights and Health in the Face of COVID-19,” and a 2020 report by the African Union on the gender-sensitive approach to COVID-19 in Africa. Several other scientific and news articles were also analyzed.

In addition, individual interviews were conducted with three leaders from three journalists’ associations, including one man and two women. These included an official from the National Union of Journalists of Côte d’Ivoire, the spokesperson for the Union of Local Radio Stations of Côte d’Ivoire (URPCI), and an official from the Union of Female Sports Journalists of Côte d’Ivoire (UFRESA-CI). In addition to these individuals, four female journalists (from print, online, radio, and television media), three female photographers from print media, and four male journalists were interviewed. A total of 14 interviews were conducted.

Direct observation concluded the data collection phase. The objective of this triangulation was to identify the strategies employed by women in the media during the global health crisis, their role in the fight against it, and the prospects for sustaining their efforts.

2- Results and Analysis

2.1. Women in the Media: Recipients and Conveyors of Information

In Côte d'Ivoire, during health crises, messages are typically disseminated as part of public awareness campaigns (Aka, 2025). They flood all traditional and digital media outlets. When COVID-19 struck the country, the situation was similar. The government worked to broadcast messages continuously on television, radio, in newspapers, and on social media. At that particular stage, both women and men in the media, without exception, served as information disseminators. Primarily, it was the Ministry of Health that issued the press releases, which all media outlets then broadcast.

“Initially, the messages we received were not specifically aimed at women,” explains S.K., a reporter for the general-interest newspaper **Fraternité Matin**. Later, the national strategy to combat COVID-19 was tailored to women. Awareness campaigns began to specifically target women. For example, the website *abidjan.net* notes that “in May 2020, nearly 500 women in the informal sector received more than 84 million CFA francs allocated by the Ministry of Youth Promotion and Employment.” (Ministry of Youth Promotion, Professional Integration, and Civic Service, 2020) This occurred one month after the first case was reported.

As a result, initiatives for women began to multiply. It was primarily the Ministry of Health that issued the press releases, which were then disseminated by all media outlets. “Initially, the messages we received were not specifically aimed at women,” explains S.K., a reporter for the general-interest newspaper **Fraternité Matin**. Later, the national strategy to combat COVID-19 was adapted to address women’s needs. Awareness campaigns began to specifically target women. For example, the website *abidjan.net* reports that “in May 2020, nearly 500 women in the informal sector received more than 84 million CFA francs allocated by the Ministry of Youth Promotion and Employment.” This was one month after the first case was reported. Gabo (2020).

Women in the media represent the dual pulse of information: they perceive it with precision and disseminate it with force. Indeed, women working in the media are the lifeblood of information dissemination. As experienced recipients and agents of creativity, they analyze the world, shape public opinion, and give a voice to those who are often marginalized. In doing so, they reshape the public sphere with remarkable commitment, sensitivity, and power. In this dynamic context, their role rests on two major pillars. On the one hand, as conscious and critical consumers, they do not merely absorb the news; they filter, question, and analyze it with indispensable acuity.

Whether they are journalists, analysts, or producers, these women demonstrate a keen awareness of social, political, and cultural issues. They possess a unique ability to grasp subtleties, identify gray areas, and transform raw information into understandable content, all while avoiding the pitfalls of stereotypes and unconscious biases that are often present when addressing certain topics. Furthermore, by playing an essential role as purveyors of diverse information and by being driven by boldness and determination, they help shape a more inclusive media landscape.

Through their reports, columns, and investigations, women in the media educate, raise awareness, and challenge the status quo (Sanogo, 2022). They offer an indispensable perspective on the issues facing local communities, advocate

for gender equality, and ensure that everyone's rights are taken into account. Their presence within the industry helps provide a more equitable and accurate representation of global diversity. Ultimately, women in print media, radio, television, and online media are essential and indispensable to democracy. Their daily work often carried out with dedication despite on-the-ground challenges and digital constraints ensures the fundamental right to diverse, independent, and enlightening information.

In short, as observers, they capture the whispers of society, accurately decipher human realities, detect the subtleties behind concrete facts, and give voice to the concerns of the voiceless. As agents of transformation, they carry the message across borders, disseminate authentic and verified information, drive change through their leadership, and build bridges between different cultures.

This comes one month after the first case was reported. As a result, initiatives for women have begun to multiply. Each woman receives 200,000 CFA francs to revitalize her activities in the fields of crafts, commerce, and the restaurant industry. "On Monday, June 22, 2020, the symbolic check-presentation ceremony took place in the CNPS auditorium, located in the Plateau district," reports Jean Bavane Kouika, a journalist for Abidjan.net (2020). Subsequently, the Ivorian Civil Society Convention (SCI) developed a structured action plan. These initiatives targeted healthcare professionals, journalists, and the general public. Symbolic check presentation ceremony by France to the Pasteur Institute of Côte d'Ivoire (IPCI), available at <https://news.abidjan.net/photos/660356-ceremonie-de-remise-symbolique-dun-cheque-de-la-france-a-linstitut-pasteur-de-cote-divoire-ipci>

Media professionals, as disseminators of information, participated in all the activities that were organized. This was all the more crucial because the goal was to strengthen the involvement of social actors in radio and television discussions, which the media professionals were responsible for designing and leading. The goal is to integrate the media into communication for behavioral change and to position them as leaders of awareness-raising initiatives across the country's regions and districts (Aka, 2025).

The implementation of this project, which spans a three-month period (April through June 2020), is based on an action strategy encompassing eight components, including community education and awareness-raising, as well as communication aimed at behavior change. These measures have led to the involvement of women in several areas. The Network of United Professional Women of the Council of the Entente (REFPUCE) also conducted an educational tour targeting women in the five countries of the Council of the Entente in Côte d'Ivoire. They explained the importance of maintaining best practices and hygiene and safety measures to protect themselves from the virus.

On Sunday, June 7, 2020, in Abidjan, the Ministry of Health and Public Hygiene, represented by Dr. Édith Clarisse Kouassy, technical advisor to the minister, urged women to play a more active role in raising awareness about the coronavirus pandemic. This took place during the daily press conference on the management of COVID-19. On June 8, 2020, "on this day dedicated to mothers around the world, we hope that women will serve as our intermediaries

with their spouses, children, and loved ones in this fight. ‘Together, let’s put an end to the coronavirus in our nation,’” stated Dr. Edith Kouassy. Women in the media were not left out.

Through various associations, they have committed to contributing more than men in their newsrooms. “According to Monique Kakou, president of community radio stations, women have taken the initiative to cover COVID-19 news more extensively than their male counterparts,” she said.

Overall, particularly in print media, it is often women who cover health-related topics, as noted by D.T. of Abidjan.net. Women in the media have since moved from the observation stage to the action stage. Their role has evolved within their communication strategy. They have transitioned from being mere recipients of information to producers and disseminators of information. In this regard, they take great pride in their role as educators.

According to the CSCI National Coordinator, MAHAMADOU Kouma, media professionals must tirelessly pursue their noble mission of informing, raising awareness, and educating the public. They must adhere to the ethics and professional standards of their profession in the course of their work. As for social media users, they must avoid spreading rumors that could cause widespread panic. (WHO, 2020). In this regard, the UN official acknowledges the importance of the media in the fight against COVID-19. He makes this point because he recognizes the effectiveness of radio in this context.

He maintains that in the context of the response to COVID-19, “radio is an essential channel for sharing awareness messages and ensuring that the population remains protected” (op. cit.). A recent survey conducted by the WHO and a government study both revealed that “radio and television are the primary sources of information for 99% of the population.”

2.2. Women in the Media: Content Creators and News Reporters

During the COVID-19 health crisis, women in the media distinguished themselves by organizing awareness-raising activities and conducting investigations and news reports.

2.2.1. Producing Sophisticated Content

The Radio Santé Côte d’Ivoire platform was launched in 2015 by the French Muskoka Fund, initially to strengthen communication about interventions aimed at improving maternal and child health. Since then, the platform has evolved to cover all health issues, and with news coverage largely focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, Radio Santé produces a variety of programs, all dedicated to the disease.

“The Radio Santé platform’s programs cover the country’s 33 health regions and have an immediate impact on the Ivorian population, even those living in the most remote and rural areas,” says Bintou Sanogo, a journalist and producer of the health program *Plurielle* on Radio Côte d’Ivoire and deputy coordinator of the platform. Currently, the Radio Santé platform reaches an average of 15 million people across the country through its health-

focused programs. The organization has therefore launched training sessions for 90 journalists, hosts, producers, and directors of health programs at local radio stations. From February 21st the date of the first training session session for media professionals on COVID-19 through June 30, 2020, the platform produced and broadcast more than 200 programs in collaboration across its various sections.

In addition to the Platform, the WHO, through the Ministry of Health, is leveraging 21 community radio stations across the country to broadcast COVID-19 messages and facilitate debates and discussions about the disease and its spread.

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, the Platform's activities have intensified. Marcelin hopes that these collaborative broadcasts will continue and be adapted to the evolving pandemic situation in the country. A resident of Man and a teacher by profession, he remains hopeful thanks to Radio Santé's broadcasts: "Our activities have slowed down and our purchasing power has decreased, but the programs I listen to give me hope they make me realize that even though we have many confirmed cases, there are also many recoveries and fewer deaths. By listening to Radio Santé, I've learned how to truly protect myself, and I know that following the guidelines they share will make a real difference and allow us to live healthy lives overall."

Media professionals in Côte d'Ivoire joined forces with the government from the very beginning to work together and stem the spread of the pandemic. Other radio stations plan to join the Platform, and the coordinated public awareness programs produced by Bintou and her colleagues have multiplied: "The current public health emergency is COVID-19. That is why we are doing everything we can to win this public health battle and fully fulfill our role," she concludes proudly.

2.2.2. From News Articles to Advocacy and Lobbying

Press reports are the ideal way to turn a cause into a matter of public interest. They rely on verified facts and powerful testimonies to raise public awareness. To move forward, this momentum of public support and media coverage must be transformed into formal advocacy and direct pressure, with the goal of convincing policymakers to take action. Information is the cornerstone of democracy. When an issue arises whether social, environmental, or economic it often goes unnoticed by those in positions of power. This is where the news article plays its essential role.

Studies, opinion polls, and media coverage indisputably reveal an injustice or an opportunity. They have the power to transform an individual concern into a national issue. Through personal accounts and the impact of journalism, the media raise awareness and encourage reflection. However, public protest alone is not always enough to bring about change. For change to be genuine, we must cross the line between mere awareness and political action. It is in this context that advocacy plays an important role.

Political advocacy is a structured process that involves moving from identification ("what isn't working") to resolution ("what needs to be changed"). This is when nonprofit organizations, collectives, or organized citizens

gather their arguments to draft memoranda and position papers. Advocacy uses news articles as leverage to support its cause and accurately portray the reality of the issue. It lends a human dimension to legal texts.

While advocacy generally targets the general public, lobbying is directed specifically at policymakers. It involves establishing a dialogue with lawmakers, ministers, or institutions to secure the passage, amendment, or rejection of a law. Far from being negative, ethical and transparent lobbying is a sophisticated process based on sound arguments and serious negotiations. It transforms public opinion into concrete proposals that comply with the legal and financial constraints imposed by political leaders.

This perfect balance is the foundation of a cause's success: the media highlights the situation and draws attention to it. Advocacy shapes the petition and mobilizes citizens, while lobbying works to find a solution with institutions. While advocacy generally targets the general public, lobbying addresses political decision-makers directly.

Recognizing radio's central role in people's lives, the World Health Organization (WHO) has supported the Platform by providing radio stations with state-of-the-art equipment and training health journalists so they are adequately equipped to share life-saving information. "Our goal is to ensure that journalists remain professional in their reporting and provide communities with accurate, practical, and useful information about COVID-19—all of which will enable communities to make informed decisions and adopt the desired behaviors in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic," explains Souleymane Koné, Program Officer and Communications Manager at the WHO. Indeed, a large part of the economy rests on their shoulders. They are the ones who feed the nation, accounting for 60% of subsistence agriculture. They are the ones who supply our markets with the fresh produce we consume every day.

3- Discussion: Women in the Media During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Constructive Role in Côte d'Ivoire, Africa, and Around the World

Conversation is not simply an exchange of words, but the establishment of an invisible connection between minds to create a shared world. Engaging in debate does not mean seeking to dominate others or impose one's own truth, but rather accepting the confrontation of different points of view to reveal a broader reality. In this context, dialogue exerts a profoundly constructive influence, both for the individual and for the community. It shapes us on a personal level. Confronting a contrary opinion pushes us to question our convictions, refine our reasoning, and expand the boundaries of our thinking. It is by reflecting on the other person's words that we come to understand ourselves better.

Rather than weakening our beliefs, genuine exchange tests, tempers, and nourishes them. By transforming our perception of the world, it transforms us. At the community level, discussion is the glue that binds relationships between individuals. It defuses conflicts before they escalate into violence and replaces misunderstanding with empathy. Every time two people truly listen to one another, they add a brick to the edifice of social harmony. The

exchange of viewpoints fosters collaborative intelligence: the clash of ideas often sheds light on consensual solutions.

Ultimately, taking a constructive approach in a discussion means choosing openness and creativity. It means transforming the ego's monologue into a human symphony where each voice, through its uniqueness, contributes its true value. To discuss is to build together. Ultimately, adopting a constructive attitude during a conversation means choosing openness and creativity. It involves transforming the egotistical monologue into a human symphony where each voice, through its diversity, contributes its fair share. Discussing is building together.

Conclusion

In conclusion, women in journalism are no longer limited to reporting the facts: with strength and boldness, they play a dual role as educators and awareness-raisers, thereby helping to shape the future. As information specialists, they stand as builders of a more enlightened society. As educators and advocates, they not only have the role of illuminating the path to empowerment, but also the power to break down stereotypes and foster civic awareness.

By continuing to communicate accurately and raise awareness with compassion, they foster the emergence of a more inclusive, just, and compassionate world for future generations. Through their voices, their writing, and their moving images, they break down barriers, raise awareness, and convey crucial values of equality and justice. These professionals transform information into a powerful tool for change, giving social struggles a unique resonance. It is no longer a matter of supporting and promoting their impact in the public sphere as a mere option, but as an indispensable obligation for building a more equitable, enlightened, and inclusive society.

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